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The Indonesia Human Rights Campaign

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An Open Letter to Pope John Paul II

His Holiness Pope John Paul II,
The Vatican

Dear Pope John Paul,

We call on you to intercede without delay on behalf of many East Timorese who are now in detention and being tortured and beaten up for demonstrating in favour of independence during your mass. We are distressed by a statement from a Vatican spokesman that you were not disturbed by the incident and sincerely hope that this does not correctly reflect your views.

You were yourself witness to the violence against peaceful demonstrators who used the occasion of your mass in Taci-Tolu on 12 October to draw your attention to the profoundly important question of the future status of East Timor. The head of the church, Bishop Belo, has since revealed that 40 people were arrested after the mass and have been tortured and beaten. Another five have sought refuge in the bishop's residence. Bishop Belo expressed outrage that the Indonesian military are trying to implicate the Catholic Church in the demonstration. "I am shocked that the military is extracting false confessions under torture. The boys were trying to express their discontent with the situation in East Timor. It is a lie that the church is in any way involved in the demonstration."

Bishop Belo also said that before you left East Timor, he asked you to intercede on behalf of the demonstrators with the Indonesian Government. In supporting Bishop Belo in that request, we would remind you that the Indonesian authorities have a record of extreme brutality in East Timor against anyone expressing views critical of their illegal presence in the country. If they so ferociously beat back the demonstrators even in your presence and the presence of the world's press, it is not difficult to imagine what they are doing now that world attention has again turned away from the country.

As you are well aware, the Indonesian Government has from the start been determined to draw political advantage from your visit to East Timor, using it to endorse its illegal integration of East Timor. Although officially the Vatican still stands by the UN's rejection of this claim and you also turned down a request

by Indonesia to incorporate the East Timor church into the Indonesian Bishops' Conference, the context in which your visit took place implicitly endorses Indonesia's illegal annexation. In your sermon, you said nothing to comfort the people of East Timor. When you said "I pray that those who have responsibility for life in East Timor will act with wisdom and goodwill towards all", you were acknowledging Jakarta's role, calling on the forces of occupation merely to treat their victims better than hitherto.

The poor attendance at your mass is an indictment of the way your visit was organised by your hosts, the Indonesian Government. Although 400,000 were expected to attend, less than a quarter turned up. Many were transported by army trucks and naval vessels, suggesting that some of those present were not from East Timor at all. The area behind the mountain range isolating Taci-Tolu from the hinterland was heavily guarded and priests told foreign journalists that fear of the army made many East Timorese reluctant to attend the mass. Under normal circumstances in conditions of freedom, there is no doubt that there would have been a huge turnout of the faithful to greet you in East Timor.

Your actions in East Timor did nothing to bring the East Timorese people any closer to a peaceful solution to their 15-year conflict with Indonesia. On the contrary, while hundreds of thousands who did not or could not attend your mass must be feeling bitterly disappointed, those who did attend left for home only with abstract messages ringing in their ears. Meanwhile, dozens of people are now suffering at the hands of torturers for daring to demonstrate in your presence. If any significance is to be attached to the statement in your homily in Taci-Tolu that "respect for rights which render life more humane must be further assured", it is beholden on you to urge the Indonesian Government to release without delay all those who have been arrested and call upon it to desist from further acts of repression against people trying to speak out in favour of independence.

Yours sincerely,

Carmel Budiardjo,
Organising Secretary